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Bashir Qorgab—al-Shabaab Veteran Commander Killed in U.S. Airstrike

John Foulkes

On February 22, an airstrike carried out by U.S. Africa Command killed a senior al-Shabaab leader, Bashir Mohamed Mahamoud (a.k.a. Bashir Qorgab) ([Radio Muqdisho](#), March 7). As a senior operational commander in the Somali militant group, Qorgab is believed to have been involved in the planning of the attack on the military base Camp Simba and its Manda Bay airstrip used by U.S. and Kenyan forces. The attack killed one U.S. army soldier and two contractors, and destroyed six aircraft. Though the airstrike occurred on February 22, the Somali and U.S. governments did not confirm it was Qorgab who was killed until March 7 ([Radio Muqdisho](#), March 7; [SABC](#), March 9).

Somalia's state radio, Radio Muqdisho, reported that the strike took place in the town of Saakow, in Somalia's Middle Juba region, killing both Qorgab and his wife, who was also a member of

al-Shabaab ([Radio Muqdisho](#), March 7; [Jerusalem Post](#), March 8).

Qorgab was born sometime between 1979 and 1982, and was a senior al-Shabaab leader for over a decade, having been one of ten members of al-Shabaab's executive council, as of 2008. On April 13, 2010, the United States placed Qorgab on the list of specially designated global terrorists. The U.S. State Department's Reward for Justice program offered \$5 million for information that led to his arrest in June 2012, pointing to the fact that he led a mortar attack against the then-Transitional Federal Government in Mogadishu in June 2009, and was involved in coordinating activities with al-Qaeda, as of 2007 ([U.S. Treasury](#), April 13, 2010; [Rewards for Justice](#), June, 2012; [Standard Media](#), June 8, 2012).

Most recently, he led three units of al-Shabaab fighters, two of which were operating inside of Kenya, according to USAFRICOM spokesperson Col. Chris Karns. These include a unit of the Jaysh al-Ayman, an elite group of al-Shabaab fighters active in the southeastern

Lamu county of Kenya, in the area of Manda Bay. A Somali intelligence official reportedly said that the Jaysh al-Ayman were responsible for the Manda Bay attack, though it could also have been done by one of al-Shabaab's commando units. Qorgab previously trained the Jughta Ulu, an al-Shabaab commando unit ([All Africa](#), March 9; [The Star](#), March 9).

At the time of his death, Qorgab was purportedly involved in a dispute within al-Shabaab's leadership. Somalia's intelligence agency, the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA), reported last month that Qorgab was removed from al-Shabaab's executive council alongside another senior commander, Mahad Karate. Al-Shabaab leader Abu Diriye (a.k.a Ahmad Umar; a.k.a. Abu Ubaidah) allegedly removed them for advising against the continued targeting of civilians in Mogadishu ([Twitter.com/HSNQ_NISA](#), February 3; [Garowe Online](#), February 4).

Additional information indicates that Qorgab and Karate's expulsions were a result of financial disagreements and inter-clan conflict with Diriye. Karate was the head of finances and intelligence for al-Shabaab. Karate's and Qorgab's clans disputed the expulsions, and Karate in particular was accused of hoarding resources on behalf of his Hawiye clan, which is the largest in Somalia. Diriye has been attempting to wrestle further control of the group from Karate, something which has proved difficult due to deep clan allegiances. Diriye has allegedly responded to this by reaching out to smaller clans, in order to form a larger conglomeration to challenge Hawiye influence ([Daily Nation](#), March 27).

That Qorgab's death happened so soon after his expulsion, approximately two weeks, will likely

stoke al-Shabaab's infighting. The group is currently riven with "allegations and counter-allegations of espionage," according to an intelligence report ([Daily Nation](#), March 27). Qorgab's killing coming in the midst of an inter-clan struggle within the group will likely foster continued mistrust between Diriye and other leaders.

The airstrike that killed Qorgab also comes in the context of a rigorous air campaign by the United States against al-Shabaab in Somalia. Recently, commentators have pointed out that U.S. airstrikes in the country have kept pace with those in Syria and Iraq in 2020, and the United States launched an average of one airstrike per week in 2019 ([Garowe Online](#), March 10). These constant attacks have hamstrung al-Shabaab operations, making them dysfunctional within the villages they occupy and forcing some operatives to hide in urban areas, where there is a less likely chance of an airstrike ([Garowe Online](#), March 26).

Despite the leadership disputes, inter-clan squabbles, and U.S. airstrikes, al-Shabaab has maintained its ability to conduct small and large-scale attacks, mostly in Mogadishu. However, Qorgab was a veteran commander of the group, leading al-Shabaab fighters since the early days of the Somali civil war's current phase. His death highlights the multiple challenges, both internally and externally, the terrorist group faces in maintaining its operational capacity into the future.

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Escape from Pakistan: TTP Spokesperson Ehsan ullah Ehsan Fled from Custody

Farhan Zahid

In February 2017, Pakistani security and law enforcement authorities managed to get Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) spokesperson Ehsan ullah Ehsan to defect to Pakistani authorities. Or, at least, government officials proclaimed that he had surrendered to authorities and was cooperating with them ([News International](#), February 10). Ehsan's capture was portrayed in Pakistani media as a great achievement and for months was a major news item. The event seemed to have broken the back of TTP. Ehsan was not just a spokesperson of the most lethal Islamist terrorist group operating in Pakistan, but one of its most important commanders.

In the first week of this year, it became public knowledge that Ehsan Ullah Ehsan had escaped from the custody of security forces and rejoined TTP ranks somewhere in eastern Afghanistan (his claim that he had reached Turkey is believed to be a diversion). Ehsan's escape has turned out to be an important development in the context of the ongoing Afghan peace talks, which have put TTP's future in question. Moreover, a seasoned commander has returned to TTP's ranks, and this is crucial for its resurgence in Pakistan given Ehsan's extensive experience in planning and carrying out terrorist attacks in the country. In February, after a long delay, Pakistan's interior minister confirmed Ehsan's escape. ([Geo News](#), February 17).

Who is Ehsan Ullah Ehsan?

Liaquat Ali, a.k.a Ehsan Ullah Ehsan, hails from Mohmand district of the former tribal areas of Pakistan (now part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province). He joined TTP during the Islamist insurgency in Swat in 2008, where the Tehreek-e-Nifaz e Shariat Mohammadi (TNSM), one of the integral groups under the TTP umbrella, had, along with TTP, seized large swaths of territory. The insurgency occupied Malakand division in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and began enforcing Sharia law.

Ehsan quickly rose to become TTP's spokesperson, claiming on behalf of TTP a number of major terrorist operations. These operations included an attempt on the life of future Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai in 2012; the terrorist attack on Bacha Khan International Airport in Peshawar in December 2012; the killing of nine foreign tourists in June 2013 in Gilgat-Baltistan; the suicide attack on spectators watching a parade at the Pakistan-Indian border in November 2014 that killed 60 people; the assassination of the provincial home minister of Punjab in August 2015; and the Easter Day suicide attack on Christians in March 2016, which killed 72 people ([Geo News](#), April 26, 2017). During his time in security forces' custody, Ehsan provided crucial information about TTP leadership, including details of the leadership's move to Afghanistan following Pakistan's military operation in North Waziristan district. From their new location in eastern Afghanistan, they planned terrorist attacks.

How and why Ehsan surrendered to the authorities, or whether he was arrested by law enforcement bodies, is unknown. His surrender was announced by Lt. General Asif Ghafoor,

director general of the Pakistani military's media wing, the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) ([Al-Jazeera](#), April, 17, 2017). The news marked the first ever surrender of a high-profile TTP leader in Pakistan. Ehsan was added to the U.S. list of specially designated terrorists in April 2018 ([U.S. Treasury Department](#), April 2, 2018). Ehsan had earlier been a spokesperson for Jamaat ul Ahrar (JuA) ([Express Tribune](#), February 17). JuA is a faction of TTP, which is not a monolithic entity but rather an umbrella group representing a number of Pakistani militant groups.

The Escape

Ehsan's escape from the custody of Pakistani security forces caused significant controversy. That a high-profile terrorist could easily escape along with his family from a safe house in Peshawar was difficult for the Pakistani public to believe. The government response came to the public's attention only after an audio message by Ehsan describing his escape from custody was uploaded to social media by the TTP media wing. In the message, he claimed to have joined ranks of TTP, stating:

“I am Ehsan ullah Ehsan. I am the former spokesman of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and Jamaatul Ahrar. I had surrendered to the Pakistani security authorities on February 5, 2017 under an agreement. I honored this agreement for three years, but the Pakistani authorities violated it and kept me in a prison along with my children...On January 11, 2020 with the help of Allah, I succeeded in escaping from custody, I will also

mention on whose approval this accord was made with me. And what were the terms and conditions of the agreement and which prominent figure had assured me that the agreement will be implemented,” ([News International](#), February 7).

While details have not emerged about how he managed to escape, the news of it created fissures in Pakistani society. The parents of those children who died in the attack on the Army Public School in December 2014 filed an application in the Supreme Court of Pakistan urging the authorities to explain “why the state failed in bringing Ehsan to justice”. A total of 147 children were killed by the TTP militants in the terrorist attack on the school, claimed by the TTP's Fazal ullah faction ([Dawn](#), February 13).

Repercussions

Ehsan's escape could have severe security repercussions, as it may provide a damaged TTP a moment's respite that could pave the way for its revival. With the deaths of its senior leaders, the TTP was experiencing an acute shortage of experienced commanders. Ehsan rejoining the ranks will boost TTP's operational capabilities, as he is a veteran jihadist. TTP's operations may be reactivated. He was in the custody of security forces for years, and may have learned valuable information. Most importantly, his escape will allow the TTP leadership to pursue operations in different parts of Pakistan. These operations will boost the morale of various TTP cells operating across Pakistan.

Conclusion

Past prison breaks have created havoc for the security situation in Pakistan. The Bannu district prison break in 2012 and Dera Ismail Khan district prison break in 2013 were followed by a steep rise in the number of terrorist attacks. While it may take some time for Ehsan to begin operating for TTP again, just his presence in its ranks would be a boost for TTP and heighten its activities. TTP terrorist activities have been on the decline over the last four years, but Ehsan's return will likely lead to a resurgence. Security policymakers need to take note and devise plans to handle any perceived threats. Even more importantly, Pakistani leaders need to review the failure of security measures that allowed Ehsan to escape from custody.

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The GNA's Latest Defection: A Profile of the Tripoli Militiaman-Turned-Diplomat Mohamed Shaeban 'al-Mirdas'

Dario Cristiani

In January, Muhammed Shaeban, 'al-Mirdas,' resigned as the Libyan deputy ambassador and consul general in Tunis. Allegedly, he was about to be fired and decided to step down on his own. Mirdas was not only a diplomat. Primarily, he was one of the leaders of the Tripoli Revolutionary Brigades (TRB), one of the crucial militias in the fragmented Tripoli landscape. His case was that of a militiaman-turned-diplomat, which is not such a rare occurrence in Libya.

Following his resignation, Mirdas gave an interview to the Libyan channel Wasat TV that stirred a significant amount of controversy within the Tripoli-based, UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). He revealed the existence of several ongoing conflicts between Tripoli's militias and the GNA, and within the militias themselves ([Wasat TV – YouTube](#), January 16). Mirdas accused the GNA of being corrupt and under the control of the head of the Central Bank of Libya (CBL), Sadiq al-Kabir, echoing what Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who leads the opposing Libyan National Army, has been saying for years. He also heavily criticized Fathi Bashagha, the GNA minister of the interior, saying that he was attempting to attack militias rather than incorporate them into state structures ([AkhbarLibya24](#), January 18; [218tv.net](#), February 2).

As a result of this spat, Mirdas fled to Benghazi on February 12, in effect searching for political

asylum in eastern Libya as a result of his quarrel with the GNA. The Wasat TV interview turned him into a star in the Haftar camp. Pictures also emerged on social media of his house in Ben Ashour in Tripoli being destroyed. The CBL allegedly seized funds belonging to him and Haitham al-Tajouri, the former leader of the TRB, who is a long-time friend and ally of Mirdas.

From Not-so-Militant Leader to Diplomat

Defining Mirdas as a classic militia leader would be misleading. He joined the TRB between 2012 and 2013 as an administrative director. Many Libyans on social media often criticized him for lacking real revolutionary credentials since he did not take part in the fight against the old regime. Nearly no public information is available on Mirdas' life from before the revolution. Born in Tripoli and now approaching his forties, he was a small-scale businessperson. He reportedly has family links with Tajouri. Although he lacked the militant credentials many other militia members had, he soon became a relevant TRB figure. His rise within the organization is a result of his close connections with the former TRB leader during the years when the Tripoli militias—and the TRB in particular—were becoming more central to the dynamics of the city. Even his rise within the organization shows how the TRB was more than just a classic militia, becoming a crucial actor in city politics through intimidation, fraud, extortion and robbing banks ([Middle East Eye](#), April 10, 2017).

Between 2017 and 2018, it became clear that the TRB sought to deepen its presence within fragile Libyan institutions. An economic powerhouse in Tripoli, the group wanted to further reinforce its positions by using its influence on the GNA. In

2018, the TRB wanted to increase its status by controlling municipality positions and many of its leaders were preparing to run for municipal elections ([El Manassa](#), September 21, 2018). However, even before the elections, the TRB was putting pressure on the GNA, specifically on Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed Siala, to put its people in key diplomatic roles. The TRB was in charge of the ministry's facilities, providing the militia with considerable leverage. As a result, Mirdas became general consul in Tunis, which is a crucial position due to the importance of the Tunisian capital for Libyan issues. Tunis is one of the most significant cities in the world for the Libyan post-2011 diaspora.

In Tunis: Talking to the Enemies, Preparing for the Future?

It is uncertain how many Libyans are living in Tunisia, and Tunis more specifically ([Leaders Tunisie](#), July 13, 2014). Yet their presence is palpable. The city is home to several private clinics at which Libyans have been treated over the past few years, and many loyalists of the former regime escaped and moved to the city following the revolution ([Al-Jazeera](#), August 13, 2014). It is not uncommon to bump into cars that still have old driving plates issued by the Jamahiriya—the name of Gaddafi's peculiar governing apparatus—or Libyan restaurants exposing the portrait of Mohammed Hassan, icon of traditional Libyan music and considered close to Gaddafi, who died in a Tunis clinic aged 73 in 2017 ([The National \[Abu Dhabi\]](#), June 14, 2016; [Libya Herald](#), December 18).

Wealthier Libyans can also be found in the city's nicer areas. Over the years, however, the Libyan presence has diversified, and now consists not only of former Gaddafists, but more members of

the militias—both from the west and the east of the country. They came to Tunis to receive medical care, but also to enjoy some time off the battlefield in a city that has much more to offer in terms of amenities.

Following his elevation to consul general, Mirdas acted to address a significant problem within the Libyan community in Tunisia: Gaddafi loyalists were accusing the representatives of post-revolution Libya of discriminating against them, and this was exacerbating tensions. However, while Mirdas' approach won him the sympathy of some Libyan groups, it also brought him criticism. The condemnation became particularly virulent in February 2019, when he welcomed at Tunis airport Abu Zaid Dorda, a key former Gaddafi regime figure who headed its Mukhabarat al-Jamahiriya (the intelligence services), after he was released from detention for medical reasons ([Jana News Agency](#), February 18, 2019). This approach likely created the conditions for the future shift. A critical element of the current Libyan political landscape is the increasingly vocal support for Haftar from groups of former Gaddafi loyalists.

Symptom of a Much Greater Problem

The reasons for Mirdas' defection can be found in the evolving relationship between the Tripoli militias and the GNA; the divisions within the militias themselves, which became more significant as the new conflict began in April 2019; and Haftar's attempts to co-opt as many militia leaders from the other side as possible. In the weeks following his flight from Tunis to Benghazi, Mirdas openly accused GNA Interior Minister Bashagha and the Muslim Brotherhood of planning to kill him. He said that he received a call from a military intelligence officer in the

east—thus in the territories under Haftar's control—saying that the Muslim Brotherhood allocated \$2 million for his assassination ([Al Saaa 24](#), February 2). Mirdas compared Bashagha to Habib al-Adly, Egypt's interior minister from 1997 to 2011 under Mubarak, who was sentenced to prison on charges of corruption ([Lana News Agency](#), February 2).

Mirdas has historically had problems with Bashagha: the first, open clash between the two happened in late 2018, after Islamic State attacked the ministry of foreign affairs in Tripoli ([The Libya Herald](#), December 26, 2018). Mirdas accused Bashagha of being close to the Muslim Brotherhood and made several references to the fact that he “should respect Tripoli and its people” ([Libya24](#), December 26, 2018). This was a reference to the fact that Bashagha is not from Tripoli—he is from Misrata—but since gaining the interior minister position in October 2018, he has been trying to put an end to the GNA's arbitrary control of militias in Tripoli (see [MLM](#), June 4, 2019; [Al-Hurra TV](#), May 8, 2019).

However, the contradictions in the relations between Bashagha and the Tripoli government are also re-emerging these days, and the resignation/sacking of Mirdas is just one of the many dynamics that have materialized in these troubled relations over the past few months. In late February, several clashes took place between Bashagha and the Nawasi militia over the kidnapping of a security official and the attack on the port in Tripoli, which is currently controlled by the Nawasi ([Libyan Express](#), February 24; [Al-Jazeera](#), February 19). The TRB itself has gone through several changes, and Tajouri has been replaced as leader by Ayoub Bouras, who pro-Haftar media describe as being close to Turkey ([Al-Arabiya](#), February 3). No

official news on the whereabouts of Tajouri has emerged, although on social media some pictures surfaced showing him living in the UAE. Tajouri was also in the UAE in the days of the inter-militia battle in Tripoli in 2018, when he disappeared for a few weeks.

Conclusions

Mirdas's defection to Haftar's side was not entirely unexpected, as there were some indications that he was moving in that direction. The way in which he left his position, however, bought him a significant amount of sympathy within Haftar's camp, especially as he launched an attack on those that are considered Haftar's main enemies: GNA Interior Minister Bashagha, the CBL Governor al-Kabir, and the Muslim Brotherhood, although the latter is now much weaker than it used to be in Libya. Mirdas's defection and the end of Tajouri's leadership in the TRB also show the shifting reality within Tripoli's militias. In essence, this dynamic has been ongoing for some time, with a stream of mysterious murders in Tripoli that started in late 2018 and mounting criticisms against the militia leaders on the battlefield. The TRB was the most affected among Tripoli's militias because there were several suspected instances of its leadership being approached by Haftar since the beginning of the new conflict in April 2019. The past months proved that, for Haftar, this is an essential tool of his military campaign: his most important advances were not thanks to military victory, but were the result of militias shifting sides. This is what happened in Gharyan, with Adel Daab, and in Sirte, with the Makhdali 604 Brigade. It happened even before this conflict, with Kanyat in Tarhuna shifting sides when they realized they were being kept out of Tripoli

power arrangements. Mirdas' defection is the latest episode in an ongoing trend.

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AQAP's New Emir: Who is Khalid Batarfi

Ludovico Carlino

On February 23, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) released a video message from its prominent scholar Hamid al-Tamimi confirming the death of the group's leader, Qasim al-Raymi, from a U.S. drone strike in Yemen ([NewsYemen](#), February 23; [al-Arabiya](#), February 23). In the same message, al-Tamimi announced the appointment of a new emir, Saudi national Khalid Batarfi, who has been on the rise within the organization since 2015. What follows is a profile of Batarfi and an assessment of the future direction the group might take under Batarfi's leadership.

Background Details on Batarfi

The most detailed information about the life of the new AQAP's emir is found in an anonymous biography of him that emerged sometime in 2006, when it was uploaded on an Islamist extremist online platform by a pro-jihadist chat user. [1] According to this biography, Khalid Omar Saeed Batarfi al-Kindi was born in 1979 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, although local media suggested he is of Yemeni origin, likely from the southern Hadramawt region ([Nashwan News](#), September 5, 2010; [al-Shibami.net](#), May 10, 2013; [al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), April 5).

Batarfi attended a public school in Jeddah, although no mention is made about what he studied. He graduated in 1997, and his process of radicalization likely was prompted by the study of jihadist literature. At that time, the extremist community was largely influenced by the mujahideen efforts in Afghanistan, and so it

is not surprising that Batarfi was heavily influenced by well-known jihadist ideologues. The biography mentions that his early mentors were Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, and Abdullah Azzam, who were all involved in the promotion of jihad in Afghanistan. The radicalization process was demonstrably effective on Batarfi, as in 1999 he went to Afghanistan to receive training at the infamous al-Farouk camp near Kandahar. He joined the mujahideen and the Taliban on the frontlines, fighting against the Northern Alliance for eight months ([Elwahabiya](#), July 8, 2018).

In 2000, Batarfi returned to Saudi Arabia, where he continued his religious training and began to work with other local figures to recruit fighters for al-Qaeda, suggesting that while in Afghanistan he formed relationships with the group's leadership. In 2001, Batarfi went back to Afghanistan, where he met al-Qaeda's late leader Osama Bin Laden ([Masrawy](#), February 23). Following the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, Batarfi fled to Pakistan and then, due to the severe restrictions he found there, to Iran, where he was arrested alongside a group of al-Qaeda militants ([Tahdeeth](#), February 26). It was in this country that Batarfi met Abu Basir Nasser al-Wahishi, the future founding AQAP leader ([Elwahabiya](#), July 8, 2018). Released from prison in 2002, Batarfi traveled with him to Yemen, where they were arrested again in 2004, being freed in 2006. In Yemen, Batarfi continued his recruiting efforts, facilitating the transfer of jihadists to fight in Iraq ([Tahdeeth](#), February 26). In 2008, he ultimately joined the original nucleus of al-Qaeda in Yemen, led by Hamza al-Kuwaiti. After Kuwaiti's death in 2009, Batarfi was appointed as a member of the group's Sharia committee. The biography concludes with Batarfi in detention, yet again, in Taiz,

central Yemen, in 2011 ([26Sep](#), March 17, 2011). Local media indicates that at the time, Batarfi had already taken part in several AQAP operations across the Abyan province as AQAP's chief military commander. The group was attempting to seize territory and declare an emirate in the region ([Masrawy](#), February 23; [Tahdeeth](#), February 26). When he was arrested in Taiz, he had just been appointed to supervise AQAP's media network in Yemen.

Batarfi's Rise

Batarfi spent three years in the Sanaa political prison, during which he was sentenced to an additional eight-year prison term ([Masrawy](#), February 23). In 2014, he was transferred to Mukalla central prison in southern Yemen, where he remained until April 2015, when AQAP militants seized the city and assaulted the local prison ([al-Arabiya](#), April 2, 2015). During the attack, the militants managed to free approximately 300 inmates, half of whom were former members of the group, including Batarfi ([Gulf News](#), April 3, 2015). Shortly after the prison escape, Batarfi became AQAP's public face when pictures of him defiantly posing inside the local provincial governor's palace in al-Mukalla were published in local newspapers ([National Yemen](#), April 4). Despite their highly symbolic nature, the pictures were the first indication of the new leading position in the city entrusted to Batarfi, who was appointed the new "governor of al-Mukalla" by the group ([al-Jazeera](#), May 6, 2015).

The 2015 prison break marked the beginning of Batarfi's ascendancy within AQAP, with the Saudi militant beginning to be featured in almost all of the group's major media releases. In May and June 2015, he announced the death of key

AQAP official Nasr al-Anisi and AQAP's former leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi, both killed in a U.S. drone strike. These appearances, delivering key messages on behalf of AQAP at a time when its leadership was decimated by counter-terrorism operations, highlighted Batarfi's growing importance within the organization and his steady ascendancy toward a leadership position.

Batarfi's media appearances can be divided into three thematic subjects: statements related to key global issues directly or indirectly affecting the larger Muslim community; sermons and video statements concerning religious issues and jihadist ideology; and statements regarding key developments on the Yemeni battlefield. The combination of these subjects has been key to his projection of the image of a charismatic religious ideologue attentive not only to local dynamics in Yemen, but also to larger trends in the jihadist movement. Batarfi's public role, coupled with his experience in the battlefield in Afghanistan and Yemen, has created the image of an "old-generation" jihadist opposed to the younger generation of Islamic State militants. A video from December 2016 video featured Taliban militants and Batarfi in a video together, celebrating their alliance with al-Qaeda, further confirming this trend. [2]

In September 2017, Batarfi appeared in a video calling on Muslims in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia to carry out attacks on Myanmar authorities in support of minority Rohingya Muslims. This was at a time when the Rohingya crisis was dominating the international news ([Adengd.net](#), September 2, 2017). Similarly, on January 22, 2018, Batarfi appeared in another AQAP video released in response to U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. In it, he stated that

every Muslim has a duty to “liberate the holy city,” called on Muslims to “attack the Jews and the Americans everywhere” and portrayed Trump’s decision as a “declaration of a new Jewish-Crusader war” ([al-Akhbar](#), January 22, 2018; [al-Khaleejonline](#), January 23, 2018).

Examples of religious messaging included a lecture series launched in December 2015 called "Toward Correct Awareness," in which Batarfi said he aimed to develop "a proper understanding and awareness of Islam." Another video lecture series on "the importance of repentance," titled "Reflections on the Stories of Prophets," started in June 2017. [3] These messages gradually cemented Batarfi’s position as AQAP’s chief voice and firmly established his religious expertise within the global jihadist movement.

Batarfi has spoken several times in detail about AQAP’s position on various aspects of the Yemeni conflict, as well as on the group’s future plans. He has addressed these issues through question and answer sessions conducted by the group via AQAP’s media outlet on the messaging app Telegram. In June 2018, Batarfi heavily criticized the UAE role in the Yemeni conflict, saying the country had an agenda to promote a false version of Islam and to “spread immorality to please the United States.” Asked about the decline in AQAP operations, Batarfi used a common AQAP argument, saying that the jihadists had “refrained from carrying out many attacks in order to avoid harming Muslims.” Additionally, he said that jihadist attacks under certain circumstances would benefit the group’s enemies. "We put the interests of Muslims before our interests as a group," he explained, promising that al-Qaeda would strike hard when the time was right. [4]

AQAP never publicly presented Batarfi as the group’s deputy, but there is evidence that this was the position he held before his recent rise to leadership. A report published by the UN panel of experts on Yemen in January 2020 indicated that Batarfi was appointed commander of AQAP external operations in 2017 following the death of Ibrahim Hassan Tali al-Asiri. [5]

AQAP’s Future Trajectory Under Batarfi

The killing of al-Raymi and the appointment of Batarfi comes in the context of increasing difficulties for AQAP, as the group continues to suffer from U.S. precision strikes that have decimated its leadership in recent years. The group’s operational tempo seems to have declined in recent months despite the fact that the Yemeni civil war is still raging. Batarfi, who was added to the list of specially designated global terrorists by the United States in January 2018, will likely become a top-priority target over the coming weeks and months as Washington continues its efforts to decimate the organization.

In early March, local media reported that aircraft believed to belong to the United States dropped leaflets in several Yemeni districts urging people to provide information on senior AQAP leaders, including Batarfi, Saeed Atif, and Ammar al-Sanani. Rewards of up to \$6 million were offered ([Alarabya](#), March 5; [AkhbarAlaan](#), March 9).

AQAP is at its weakest point in a decade. For the past year and a half, it has been dragged into a local battle with Islamic State in the central province of al-Bayda, and it has reduced its media operations. Meanwhile, splinter factions

and internal disagreements have continued to emerge. This was also the case regarding Batarfi's appointment. According to local media, the killing of al-Raymi triggered a fracture within AQAP, with part of the Shura Council wanting to select Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki, who was close to the late AQAP preacher Anwar al-Awlaki (AlYoum.net, 26 February). Those opposing Batarfi's appointment, local media suggested, even accused the Saudi militant of having passed information of al-Raymi's whereabouts to facilitate his elimination (YemenNow, February 25).

Given his background, Batarfi might have the religious appeal, the fighting experience, and the strong relationship with core al-Qaeda required to navigate the organization through a new phase. Batarfi will possibly alter the group's strategy, which has focused almost exclusively on domestic Yemeni operations in recent years. It is unclear, however, whether Batarfi has the necessary charisma to keep the organization together.

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Notes

[1] For the full biography, see here: <https://justpaste.it/mb2f>

[2] <https://twitter.com/thomasjoscelyn/status/807265245312012288>

[3] See MEI Report, page 14:

[https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/MEI%20Policy%20Paper Kendall 7.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/MEI%20Policy%20Paper%20Kendall%207.pdf)

[4] Ibid.

[5] See UN Report, page 9: <https://undocs.org/S/2020/53>

The Past as Precedent: Is the Taliban's Military Chief Sirajuddin Haqqani Ready for Peace?

Sudha Ramachandran

On February 29, the United States and the Taliban signed the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” in Doha, Qatar. The agreement paves the way for a pullout of American troops from Afghanistan. The Taliban has pledged to disallow groups like al-Qaeda from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States and its allies. The agreement also provides for an exchange of prisoners between the Afghan government and the Taliban and sets the stage for intra-Afghan talks ([Tolo News](#), March 1). However, it has raised several questions. There is apprehension that the Taliban will not deliver on its promises under the deal. Will it cut ties with al-Qaeda, for instance ([Tolo News](#), March 12)? The Taliban's deputy leader and Haqqani Network chief Sirajuddin Haqqani is known to have strong ties with al-Qaeda. As the Taliban's chief of military operations, he will now play a crucial role in charting the group's strategy in the coming months. In a recent article published in *The New York Times*, Sirajuddin signaled strong commitment to negotiations and peace ([Pakistan Today](#), February 20). However, his record over the past 15 years—during which he is said to have carried out some of the bloodiest attacks in Afghanistan—suggest that his support for the Doha agreement is at best tactical. It is aimed at only getting American forces to leave Afghanistan.

Early Years

The eldest son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, founder of the Haqqani Network who achieved fame as a mujahideen commander in the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, Sirajuddin was born in Afghanistan in the 1970s. He spent his childhood in Miranshah in the Pakistani tribal areas of Waziristan and studied at the Haqqaniya madrassa near Peshawar in Pakistan.

Sirajuddin did not participate in the anti-Soviet insurgency or in the intra-mujahideen battles of the early-1990s. According to a Kabul-based researcher, Sirajuddin showed little interest in the politics and turbulent developments of that period and it was only after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001 that he became active in the Afghan conflict. In the early years of the anti-U.S. insurgency in Afghanistan, Sirajuddin's importance stemmed from the fact that he was Jalaluddin's son; he drew his authority from his father's stature as a legendary mujahideen fighter. [1]

However, within a few years of joining the anti-U.S. insurgency, Sirajuddin managed to carve a name for himself in jihadist circles. The senior Haqqani's advancing age and failing health prevented him from participating in the fighting and by 2005, Sirajuddin was overseeing the Haqqani Network's day-to-day activities and operations. Soon, he became its *de facto* leader and remained in this position until 2018, when he fully took over the mantle of leadership after his father's death was made public. Thus, much of the Haqqani Network's anti-U.S. operations have been undertaken under Sirajuddin.

A Formidable Foe of the United States

Under Sirajuddin's leadership, the Haqqani Network has carried out a string of major attacks. These included the attack on the Serena Hotel in Kabul in January 2008, the Indian Embassy in Kabul in July 2008, the U.S. Embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul in 2011, the U.S. consulate at Herat in 2013, as well as a truck bomb explosion at a busy intersection in Kabul in May 2017 that killed approximately 150 people. With his attacks on high-profile targets in Afghan cities like Kabul and Jalalabad, Sirajuddin showed that he possessed "significant fighting capabilities" and established his "expertise in commando operations and urban guerrilla warfare," noted Pakistani terrorism analyst Abdul Basit. [2] Sirajuddin has inflicted significant costs on coalition forces and is therefore considered by some to be their most formidable foe.

Sirajuddin's strong ties with an array of jihadist groups, especially with al-Qaeda, have been a matter of serious concern to the United States. He provides al-Qaeda fighters safe havens along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. He has been open to recruiting Arabs as fighters and, as a result, several al-Qaeda fighters are said to be "embedded" in the ranks of the Haqqani Network. In addition to deepening the relationship that his father developed with al-Qaeda, Sirajuddin has established strong ties with other jihadist outfits like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. [3]

This continuing co-operation with banned global terrorist groups and his role in horrific terrorist attacks quickly earned him a place on several terrorist lists. On September 13, 2007, Sirajuddin was included on the United Nations sanctions list for his links with al-Qaeda, the

Taliban, and Jaish-e-Mohammed, and for "participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities" in support of their activities ([United Nations Security Council](#)). In March 2008, the U.S. Department of State declared Sirajuddin a specially designated global terrorist under Executive Order 13224. It doubled the initial bounty of \$5 million on his head to \$10 million in 2014, signaling its deep frustration with the damage he was doing to U.S. troops and assets in Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network was declared a Foreign Terrorist Organization on September 19, 2012 ([Pajhwok](#), August 21, 2014).

The Haqqanis' relationship with the United States was not always hostile. In the 1980s, Jalaluddin was an important CIA asset, who evoked much admiration and respect from Americans. He and his fighters benefited immensely from CIA funding of the anti-Soviet insurgency. So close were the Americans to Jalaluddin that they believed that they would be able to convince him to support their military operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda post-9/11. However, that did not happen. Apparently, Sirajuddin, who is strongly against the United States, convinced his father to side with the Taliban against the Americans. [4]

Ties with the Taliban

The roots of the Haqqanis' ties with the Taliban can be traced back to 1995 when Jalaluddin joined forces with Taliban fighters to take control of Afghanistan. He went on to serve as minister of tribal and frontier affairs in the Taliban regime. Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Jalaluddin threw in his lot with the Taliban in the fight against the United States.

The Haqqani Network's ties with the Taliban have always been hard to decipher. Analysts have often debated whether the network is part of the Taliban or a distinct entity. Washington has always treated the two separately; thus, while the Haqqani Network has been banned, the Taliban is not. It is thus unconvinced that negotiations with the Taliban or a deal would cease hostilities with the Haqqani Network as well.

Whatever differences may have existed in the past, the relationship between the groups have blurred over the years, especially with the Haqqani Network becoming more integrated with the Taliban after the inclusion of Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin in the *Rahbari Shura* (leadership council). Sirajuddin became deputy leader of the Taliban in July 2015, and its military commander as well in May 2016. The fuller integration of the Haqqani Network into the Taliban and appointment of Sirajuddin to top posts is said to have happened under Pakistani pressure. [5]

Pakistan's 'Sword Arm' in Afghanistan

Sirajuddin holds immense value to Pakistan, being their strategic asset in Afghanistan. He is reported to have acted on the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)'s orders to attack Indian targets in Afghanistan, such as the 2008 strike on its embassy in Kabul, to undermine Indian influence there ([The Hindu](#), September 23, 2011). Islamabad's promotion of Sirajuddin is aimed at ensuring that the insurgent group does not turn against Pakistan.

Sirajuddin is valuable to Pakistan at home as well. He has been useful to the ISI in dealing with extremist groups within Pakistan's borders, by getting them to desist from attacking the Pakistani military, for instance. [6] He is also said

to have brokered peace deals among warring sectarian militias, including in the Kurram Agency in February 2011 ([The Hindu](#), September 23, 2011).

Sirajuddin has also gained certain advantages from his close ties with Pakistan. He owes his rise in the Taliban and appointment as its deputy leader to the ISI. [7] He has received financial and logistical support from Islamabad. Besides, the ISI has allowed the Haqqani Network to operate out of North Waziristan and helped it extend their influence in southeast Afghanistan.

Sirajuddin is an asset to the Taliban, too. His strong ties to the Pakistani government and network of rich donors in several Arab countries have benefited the Taliban. Given his influence on the ISI and the Taliban, Sirajuddin has been able to play a role in breaking deadlocks between them on several occasions. [8] He has also helped resolve conflicts within the Taliban ([Khaama Press](#), April 11, 2016). Besides, as a Pashtun of the Zadran tribe, which inhabits the Loya Paktia region in Afghanistan and parts of Waziristan in Pakistan, Sirajuddin brings to the Taliban this community's support and strength. He also confers on the Taliban the prestige of the Haqqanis. Most importantly, he is a military asset to the Taliban. As military chief of the Taliban, he more than makes up for Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada's lack of military expertise or charisma. Under his command, the Taliban has not only carried out several large-scale attacks, but also made huge territorial gains in Afghanistan. [9]

In fact, Sirajuddin's role in the Taliban's growing success on the battlefield increased the group's bargaining power in negotiations with the United States, culminating in an agreement that is widely seen as a victory for the Taliban. This

would not have been possible if the Taliban had not negotiated from a position of strength. Sirajuddin’s military leadership played an important role in moving the Taliban into that advantageous position.

On Board the Doha Agreement?

Stressing the Taliban’s commitment to peace, Sirajuddin pointed out in the *New York Times* article that it had “stuck with the talks” despite unease among its fighters over the U.S.’ “intensified bombing campaign” in Afghanistan and its “flip-flopping and ever-moving goal posts” during the talks last year ([Pakistan Today](#), February 20). It seemed as if he was supporting the talks only to secure the release of his younger brother, Anas Haqqani, who was in jail in Kabul and on death row (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 2019). However, Sirajuddin did not pull out of the talks even after Anas’ release in November last year. Indeed, Anas was not only part of the Taliban negotiating team in talks with the United States but was also at the signing ceremony at Doha, signaling that the deal has Sirajuddin’s blessings.

In his *New York Times* article, Sirajuddin drew attention to the Taliban’s “commitment to ending the hostilities and bringing peace” to Afghanistan and pointed out that the group had kept the door to talks open even after U.S. President Donald Trump called off the talks last year ([New York Times](#), February 20). However, neither Sirajuddin’s peaceful rhetoric in the NYT article nor his support for the Doha deal should be interpreted to suggest he is now genuinely committed to an inclusive and peaceful Afghanistan. His support for the agreement is purely tactical, aimed at getting the Americans to leave. His support comes from the

fact that the deal gives him what he wants: it provides for the exit of American troops within a timeframe. Getting them to leave has been an important Taliban demand and a priority for Sirajuddin. The agreement paves the way for this exit. It is a gain that Sirajuddin will not give up, at least for now.

The U.S. may see Sirajuddin as a formidable foe. But for now, he and Trump hold similar objectives—getting American troops out of Afghanistan—something which will assist in the American president’s reelection campaign.

Sirajuddin and Trump will “give each other space” until the U.S. presidential election is over. Neither will precipitate an unraveling of the agreement at this point, since both are keen to draw whatever benefit they can from it. The Taliban has gained political and diplomatic capital from the deal and would like to build on it. It could therefore hold its fire against the American forces until the U.S. strategy, whether under Trump or a new president, becomes clearer. [10]

As for cutting ties with al-Qaeda, that is unlikely to happen. Sirajuddin is part of the jihadist group’s ‘innermost circle’ and has participated in its *shura* meetings ([Dawn](#), August 10, 2015). They have worked together for far too long to be able to cut ties overnight. They need each other and have little incentive to end their relationship.

Sirajuddin and the Taliban will continue on their quest for power in Kabul and use of violence will remain the main path they take to secure that power. Violence as a political tool is deeply ingrained in the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. It unites their fighters. Violence helped them force the Americans to seek an exit from

Afghanistan. It put them in a commanding position at the talks with the United States and secured them a favorable deal. They will persist with violence either to wrest control of Kabul or force the Afghan government at the negotiating table to accept a settlement on their terms.

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Notes

[1] Author's Interview, Afghan researcher at a think-tank in Kabul, March 23.

[2] Author's Interview, Abdul Basit, associate research fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, March 18.

[3] Afghan researcher, n. 1.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Basit, n. 2.

[6] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

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